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Ugliness, Grace and the Church

Acts 1:15-26

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The *lectionary* is the term that describes a three year series of Scripture selections that are supposed to guide the choice of texts for sermons. The idea is that on any given Sunday, the people who put the lectionary together put together readings that connect with one another with some theme, so you'd have a reading from the Psalms, a reading from the Old Testament (other than the Psalms), a reading from one of the Gospels, and a reading from the New Testament (other than the Gospels), for a total of four readings in all. In some churches, all four readings or lessons are used each Sunday, and pastors try to preach on a theme that runs through all or most of the texts.

I mention all this because today's reading from Acts 1 *really* went from verses 15-17 and then from verses 21-26, which is to say, the lectionary reading *left out* the stuff about Judas buying the field and falling headlong into it while his bowels gushed out of his stomach. Part of my question for today is, why?

Judas was one of the twelve apostles, the original disciples, the inner circle, and Judas sold out Jesus for money. Judas sold out Jesus and His kingdom for a pile of silver. Judas sold out Jesus by collaborating with the authorities in the arrest of Jesus. Selling out, collaboration, betrayal. This passage raises so many questions for us. Why in the world does St. Luke, the author of Acts, include it? What has this got to do with the beginning of the church? Is collaboration with the powers of the world going to be a problem for the church in the years to come? And, why did Judas betray Jesus? And everyone else?

By omitting these verses, the lectionary would have us shift our attention away from the sorry, bloody, gutsy ending of ex-brother Judas and turn our attention toward the more palatable account of the selection of Matthias as a replacement apostle. But I wonder if there is something more than good taste in the lectionary's reworking of this passage. Is this not the way the church always handles ugly matters like betrayal? Do we not turn away and scurry back to business as usual, and call for the report of the committee on rules and bylaws? We, the church, tend to treat betrayal in this fashion - we dust ourselves off, and send our clothes to the cleaners, and then get back to business. The rub is that blood is a tough stain to remove.

Luke would force us to first look at Judas. Before we march off with Easter banners flying - having survived our first 'constitutional crisis' with Judas, having elected dear uncontroversial Matthias, and having gratefully moved beyond what would later be whispered about as 'that Judas affair" - before we march off and act as if it didn't happen, Luke would have us take a long, painful though honest pause and ponder the blood of Judas.

And where does that lead us? Uncomfortably, it leads us back to us. Some weeks ago, when we all gathered with Jesus for a Passover victory party, Jesus overturned that whole banquet by dropping His bombshell: "But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table." And the disciples began to question one another, to wonder who he might mean, and

we, 2000 years later, as we read this same story, reassure ourselves that the betrayer couldn't be one of us. But Peter, here in Acts 1:17, says that 'he was numbered among us, and was allotted his share in this ministry.' That means that Judas heard all of Jesus' teaching, and he witnessed the miracles, and shared in Jesus' ministry to the world. He was with them from the beginning, he was an *eye-witness* to what actually happened. The shock is almost too much to bear for the sensitive stomach of the church.

But why *did* Judas betray Jesus? The text doesn't say but I have an idea. I think that Judas joined a movement. He didn't join a person. Judas joined a movement and became conflicted as to the goals of the movement. He began to think Jesus wasn't the right guy. Jesus was talking about going to Jerusalem and dying after three days. Judas lost what nerve he had and decided to take control. He didn't trust Jesus because, unlike the others, he hadn't really accepted the Gospel. He hadn't joined Jesus. And that's our choice as well. Some of us come to church and join the church - we don't join Jesus. So when the church begins to go in a direction we don't like, we decide it's OK to take control and do what we think is best.

But it's not about the church. Jesus didn't really speak a whole lot about starting a church. He was OK with the church beginning but his goal was reconciliation - bringing people back home to God. After He returned to the Father and to the Holy Spirit, the disciples started the church to continue the work of Jesus. And our goal isn't to maintain the church but to continue Jesus' work of reconciliation - bringing people back home to God, back to their Creator. The church is a *means* to the end of bringing people back to God, not the *end,* not the *point*. So, that's why I say, join Jesus, not the church. That's what Judas didn't do, and I think that's why Judas betrayed both Jesus and his fellow disciples.

Personally, I love Luke for putting the betrayal of Judas up front, at the beginning of Acts, still in the afterglow of Easter. Our Lord's first betrayal came from our own ranks. The lectinary doesn't think this is any way to 'begin the church.'. But I think it's significant. Luke begins the history of the church not in Acts 2 with the descent of the Holy Spirit, but in Acts 1 with the spilling of the guts of Judas. And after we get over Judas, there is the ugliness with Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, and a squabble about what to do about Gentiles in Acts 8, and all the conflict in Corinth over who's supposed to be in charge or who's spiritual gift is the best.

Where am I going with all this? Just here - that though the Gospel was rejected by one of the church's finest, and though Judas exists here and there in our churches today, the church of Jesus Christ will not be defeated by the matter of Judas' betrayal. We go on by the grace of God. We go on because regardless how we, individuals all, honor or dishonor the Gospel, God continues to love us. God is committed to us. The free gift of unmerited favor which we call grace continues to be given to us by Jesus Christ. *We don't gain salvation by good works and we don't lose it by betrayal*. <u>The church isn't a place where perfect people hang out, so the lack of perfection, or even the presence of betrayal, is a part of who we are. But the other part of who we are is God's part, the reality of new life, rebirth, and Easter.</u> And the amazing thing about grace is that Easter extends to those who crucified Him on Calvary.

On Easter, Jesus came back to those who deserted Him, and to all who have deserted Him, or to all who now desert Him, to forgive, that we might begin new life again, might serve Him faithfully despite our weakness and betrayal. And THAT is the reason why Luke placed the story of Judas into Acts 1! *People abandon God but God doesn't abandon people.* He leads the way for us. As someone said to me recently, it takes more courage to work for peace than it does to stay in conflict, something we learn from Jesus.

This is the church. *This* is the place where we 'work out' our salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure (Philippians 2:12).

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